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THE PUNJAB ELECTIONS 1992

Breakthrough or Breakdown?

Gurharpal Singh

Few recent state elections in India have had as much significance as the Punjab poll in February 1992. Punjab has been wracked by ethnic violence that has claimed over 18,000 lives since 1984, and has witnessed the rise of a powerful separatist movement for an independent Sikh state. The province had been under President's Rule since May 1987, and therefore the decision to hold elections was generally welcomed as an opportunity to unlock the intractable "Punjab problem" that had bedeviled successive Indian governments. In the event, however, the elections failed to provide a critical turning point, and their outcome seemed more likely to precipitate a political breakdown than a breakthrough. This article attempts to explain why the elections produced this outcome and why the policy initiatives undertaken by the new Congress-I government have been so unsuccessful. And in light of these developments, it analyzes prospects for the future.

The Background

No serious appreciation of the context in which the February poll was held is possible without an understanding of the post-1984 developments in Punjab. Although these have been covered at length elsewhere,¹ a brief summary is required here. After the fallout from Operation Blue Star in 1984 (the military action against the extremist Sikh faction), the Congress-I under Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi adopted a political strategy designed to solve the "Punjab Problem." The cornerstone of this strategy was the Rajiv-Longowal Accord, which appeared to meet most of the constitu-

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1. Gurharpal Singh, "The Punjab Problem in the 1990s: A Post-1984 Assessment," *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 29:2 (July 1991), pp. 175-91.

tional, territorial, economic, and religious demands of the Akali Dal, the main Sikh political party that had led the pre-1984 agitation.² The Accord was accompanied by state assembly elections in September 1985 that saw the overwhelming electoral success of a moderate Akali Dal (L) ministry.

Non-Sikh specialists are regularly bewildered by the extreme factional complexity of Sikh politics. Excluding the Congress-I, the two Communist parties, and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), four types of Sikh political leadership since 1984 can be identified and can be distinguished by chronology, tactics, and strategy toward the pursuit of Sikh demands ranging from regional autonomy within the Indian Union to a separate Sikh state. These parties are:

1. The moderates: Akali Dal (Badal), Akali Dal (Longowal), Akali Dal (Kabul), and Akali Dal (Panthic), who supported—enthusiastically or reluctantly—the Rajiv-Longowal Accord and represent the traditional pre-1984 Sikh leadership with their commitment to parliamentarism and the Anandpur Sahib Resolution (ASR—see n. 2).
2. The radicals: Akali Dal (Mann) and Akali Dal (Baba), who displaced the moderates in the 1989 Lok Sabha election and who accept the ASR but emphasize its stress on the Sikh right to self-determination.
3. The democratic militants: All-India Sikh Student Federation (Manjit), Damdami Taksal, Panthic Committee (Manochahal), Khalistan Commando Force, Bindranwala Tiger Force, and the Dashmesh Regiment, who espouse a twin strategy of parliamentarism and armed struggle for a separate state of Khalistan.
4. The armed militants: Panthic Committee (Dr. Sohan Singh), Khalistan Liberation Force, Babbar Khalsa International, and Akali Dal (Babbar), who have consistently pursued the armed struggle for Khalistan and have condemned the use of parliamentarism even as a tactic.

Although the alignments between and within these groups are in constant flux, especially with the armed groups, the four types provide a useful classification. It must be emphasized that the above types are not designations used by the groups themselves but merely tentative suggestions for a new typology of Sikh politics.

2. See *ibid.* for details of the Accord and its implementation up to 1989. The main points concerned the transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab, settlement of the Ravi-Beas water dispute with Harayana and Rajasthan, prosecution of 1984 anti-Sikh rioters, rehabilitation of 1984 Sikh army deserters, release of political detainees, enactment of an all-India Gurdwaras Act, and an evaluation of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution (ASR) calling for the Indian government's powers to be restricted to defense, currency, communications, and international affairs.

Despite its electoral victory, the moderate Akali Dal (L) administration was short-lived, undermined both by the growth of the Sikh militant organizations who challenged the constitutional path and advocated an armed struggle for a separate state and by the reluctance of the Indian government to implement major provisions of the Accord. The imposition of President's Rule in May 1987 marked the beginning of direct rule from New Delhi that lasted until February 1992. The defeat of the Congress-I government in 1989 and the success of the V. P. Singh-led National Front coalition signaled a new phase in the efforts to resolve the "Punjab Problem." Although the National Front leadership held the previous administration responsible for the deterioration of ethnic conflict in Punjab, its "value based" approach was compromised by the fear that elections in the state might create a "Latvian scenario" in which the separatist movement would accrue support. This possibility had been heightened by the results of the 1989 election for Punjab's 13 Lok Sabha (lower house) seats that led to the emergence and victory of a radical-militant Sikh leadership demanding the right of "self-determination for the Sikhs." The National Front's reluctant response to these demands was to extend two periods of President's Rule, despite its strong reservations.

The collapse of the National Front coalition and its replacement by a minority Janata (S) government was followed by renewed efforts at a negotiated solution. Chandra Shekhar, the new prime minister, first sent in the army to contain militant violence and then opened talks with the radical Sikh leadership. When the latter proved vacillating, he made a direct approach to smaller militant groups (the democratic militants). These talks culminated in a secret deal in which Shekhar, following the announcement of national elections in March 1991, authorized a notification for state assembly and parliamentary polls in Punjab.³ The democratic militant groups, for their part, agreed not to turn the elections into a "referendum on Khalistan" but use them as a means to marginalize the radicals and the armed militants.

Rajiv Gandhi's response to these maneuvers was to condemn the Shekhar-democratic militant deal and promise to revoke the elections if his party was successful in obtaining a majority at the center. As the campaign progressed, the armed militants called for a boycott, while in the absence of Congress-I, the other Sikh leadership groups—democratic militants, radicals and moderates—competed with each other. Toward the end of the campaign, the level of violence escalated dramatically: 24 state and parliamentary candidates were killed; 76 passengers on two trains were massacred; and a week before polling, Punjab was declared a dis-

3. *Indian Express* (Bombay), 28 April 1991.

turbed area. Yet, despite these setbacks, the state administration expressed an unusual determination to hold the elections on June 22, 1991. However, circumstances changed rapidly in the few days before polling as it became apparent that the Congress-I would form the new Indian government. On election eve, the Chief Election Commissioner, after talks with the new Congress-I leadership, postponed the Punjab poll until September 25. Formally, he justified his action by insisting that the increased levels of violence compelled him to make this unprecedented decision; informally, it was generally assumed that "the Chief Election Commissioner had bent backwards to please his new masters."⁴

The postponement had serious consequences. First, confidence in the state administration was shaken as Governor Malhotra resigned in protest. Second, Sikh leaders from all spectrums made common cause against the government's decision. At a meeting in Anandpur in early September, they decided to boycott any future poll on the grounds that the central government could not guarantee that it would be "free and fair." Third, the Congress-I administration found the new time frame for holding elections to be inadequate. Constrained by the September 25 deadline, the impending expiration of President's Rule, and the Congress's minority status that depended on a shifting coalition of Left and Right parties in the Lok Sabha, the administration responded by revoking the election process in Punjab through an amendment to the Peoples Representation Act (1951) and further extending President's Rule, though with an undertaking that elections would be held by February 15, 1992. The government then took a number of measures to "pacify" Punjab. K. P. S. Gill, the former chief of police who had acquired the reputation of "governor-general" and had ruthlessly prosecuted the anti-terrorist campaign, was reinstated despite opposition from the Punjab governor. In November nine divisions of the Indian army were sent to the state to contain militant activity and provide support for the elections. At the political level, the national government launched an "all-party" discussion as a way of finding a "consensus" solution to the "Punjab Problem." This posture was accompanied by strong suggestions that the outstanding provisions of the Rajiv-Longowal Accord would be implemented and that a new "package deal" for Punjab was being considered by a powerful cabinet subcommittee.

However, as the election approached, the center's strategy seemed increasingly threatened. In mid-January armed militant, democratic militant, radical, and the majority of moderate Sikh leaders reaffirmed their decision to boycott the elections. Their conditions for participation ranged from withdrawal of "military rule" to the involvement of the United Na-

4. *Indian Express*, 23 June 1991.

tions in administering the poll. Although the minority (moderate Akali Dal [K]) decided to participate, last minute suggestions that the central government was about to announce a new package deal, to include the transfer of Chandigarh and settlement of the territorial and water disputes, were insufficient to entice the majority of moderates. Procrastination over the new package was only ended after formal announcement of the Sikh boycott, made when the election notification was issued.⁵

The Election Campaign

Notification for the February 1992 poll was issued on January 25. It was preceded by two presidential ordinances that reduced the period of campaigning from 21 to 14 days and revoked the provision for countermanding an election in the event of the death of an independent candidate. These measures were taken to avoid a repetition of the June poll and to blunt the Sikh political leadership's plan to launch a countercampaign in support of the boycott. Indeed, to preempt the latter, political leaders of the six main Sikh organizations and several hundred party workers were detained under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (1985).⁶ Their efforts to lead a "Kashmir style" march from Anandpur and a call for a *bandh* on polling day were forcefully repressed.

Armed militants, on the other hand, conducted sporadic efforts to disrupt the election campaign. Warnings were issued against voting, and several campaigners—especially from the BJP—and electoral administrators were killed. But the violence did not reach the level of the previous June poll; there were no significant pre-poll massacres and no candidate was killed. This relative success was attributed mainly to the massive security operation by almost 250,000 army, paramilitary, and police personnel.⁷ Each candidate was provided with a 32-person security detachment, and for more prominent leaders, the figure was 50 or higher. This security cordon, combined with threats from armed militants, created an atmosphere of heightened tension in which the candidates were often outnumbered by security personnel when addressing election rallies. For the most part, the campaign was urban-centered and candidates avoided the rural constituencies.

The programs of the political parties that did participate ranged from the BJP's more forceful stance against Sikh militancy and the Congress-I's promises to "pacify Punjab" to the Left parties—CPI and CPI (M)—advo-

5. *Sunday Times of India* (New Delhi), 26 January 1992; *Des Pardes* (Punjabi weekly, Southall, UK), 7 February 1992.

6. *Sunday Times of India*, 2 February 1992.

7. *Tribune* (Chandigarh), 4 December 1991.

cacy of an immediate implementation of the Rajiv-Longowal Accord. The Congress-I's national leadership abandoned its proposal for common candidates following the Sikh leaders' announcement of the boycott, a decision that led some parties to argue that the Congress-I was only interested in securing the state's 13 Lok Sabha (parliamentary) seats. This perception was reinforced when the Congress-I decided to contest all of the state assembly and Lok Sabha seats. Seat adjustments occurred but this took place mainly between minor parties such as Janata Dal, Akali Dal (K), CPI and CPI (M). The BJP, abandoned by the Congress and the small parties, conducted a relatively low-key campaign despite the fact that its "unity march" coincided with the beginning of the elections.⁸

Several smaller parties and independents complained of bureaucratic and security intimidation. Captain Amrinder Singh, leader of the Akali Dal (K), alleged that three of his candidates were detained to prevent them from filing their candidacies. A breakaway faction from the Akali Dal (Badal), which had decided to participate in the elections, quickly changed its mind when its candidates could not file their papers. In fact, the total number of candidates for assembly seats was the lowest since 1972, with an average of only five candidates per seat. Several reported cases of ballot rigging on polling day were confirmed by independent observers. The armed militants' call for a total boycott was occasionally countered, especially in front-line villages, by enforced participation by security forces. Overall, however, where polling did take place, it was largely peaceful, but it was subdued compared to the normal exuberant standards of Indian electioneering.

The Result

The result belied the confident expectations of the Indian government and the Punjab administration of a 30–40% voter turnout. The actual figures were 24.3% and 21.5% for the state and parliamentary elections, respectively. Worryingly, the turnout was lower than critical assembly elections held in relatively similar circumstances in the two problem states of Kashmir (31.6% in 1987) and Assam (32.6% in 1983) and significantly less than the normal Punjab average of 68.2% (1966–85).

Nevertheless, the Congress-I made a near clean sweep of the assembly and parliamentary seats, gaining 87 and 12, respectively. The expected challenge to the Congress from the BJP and the Akali Dal (K) did not materialize. The latter performed dismally while the former made only a marginal improvement in seats from its 1985 showing. In fact, the BJP support in urban areas appears to have shifted to the Congress-I, which

8. *Sunday Times of India*, 9 February 1992.

TABLE 1 *Punjab Elections, 1992*

Party*	State Assembly (Turnout = 24.3%)		Lok Sabha (Turnout = 21.5%)	
	Seats	% Vote Polled	Seats	% Vote Polled
Congress (I)	87	43.8	12	50.8
Bahujan Samaj Party	9	16.2	1	18.6
Bhartiya Janata Party	6	16.6	—	16.5
Communist Party of India	4	3.4	—	1.7
Akali Dal (Kabul)	3	5.2	—	2.8
Communist Party of India (M)	1	2.7	—	3.4
Janata Dal	1	2.1	—	1.9
Independents	6	9.6	—	3.4
Total	117	100	13	100

SOURCE: *India Abroad*, 28 February 1992.

*Lok Dal and the Samajwadi Janata Party, whose combined vote was 0.03%, have been excluded.

gained over 50% of the vote in the major cities of Amritsar, Jalandhar, Gurdaspur, and Ludhiana. The two Communist parties also failed to capitalize on the Akali boycott in the rural areas. But perhaps the main surprise in the poll was the strong performance of the BSP, which became the main opposition party in the new assembly and secured one seat in the Lok Sabha. Appealing to Scheduled and lower caste voters, it did exceptionally well in the Doaba area (Jalandhar, Kapurthala, and Hoshiarpur districts) and the district of Faridkot.

The voter turnout was not only extremely low but was unevenly spread. Only in three districts (Firozpur, Jalandhar, and Hoshiarpur) did it exceed 30%, and this was partly attributable to urbanization (Jalandhar), the local strength of non-Sikh parties (Firozpur), and a high non-Sikh population (Hoshiarpur). Voting was especially low in rural Sikh majority areas that constitute 70 of the total 117 assembly seats, averaging 15.1% in these constituencies. In recent years these areas have also seen the rise of armed militant activity and a strong enforcement of antiterrorist measures by police and security forces. The rural constituencies set new records for lowest assembly polls. In Joga, which recorded a turnout of less than 1%, a Naxalite candidate was elected with 394 votes. The CPI (M)'s representa-

TABLE 2 *District-Wise Turnout*

<i>District</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>District</i>	<i>%</i>
Firozpur	43.3	Patiala	22.9
Hoshiarpur	36.9	Ropar	19.8
Jalandhar	30.4	Ludhiana	16.6
Kapurthala	25.8	Amritsar	16.1
Gurdaspur	24.3	Bhatinda	13.9
Faridkot	24.3	Sangrur	13.1

TABLE 3 *Urban-Rural Turnout 1992 (%)*

<i>Number of Constituencies</i>	<i>Average Vote Polled</i>
Urban (12)	38.3
Semi-Urban (11)	26.5
Semi-Rural (24)	25.3
Rural (70)	15.1

SOURCE: *India Today*, 15 March 1992

tive got only 1,849 votes. In 24 constituencies, the winning candidates each polled less than 5,000 votes and in two they were returned unopposed. The pattern was not dissimilar in the parliamentary polls; in Hoshiarpur, the winning candidate was elected with only 15,627 votes, and two other Lok Sabha candidates polled less than 60,000 votes.

The turnout in urban areas, in contrast, was relatively high. Although it did not reach the levels of 1985 (57.7%), it averaged a respectable 38.3% in the 12 urban constituencies. This difference is mainly due to the concentration in urban areas of the Punjab Hindu population—which turned out in large numbers—and the weakness of Sikh political parties in these constituencies. But in semiurban and semirural constituencies the figures were significantly lower, reflecting perhaps the possibility of dominant community pressure and fear of a backlash. In the main, the Congress-I did exceptionally well in the urban constituencies, and the accusation that its success rested entirely on the “Hindu vote” is perhaps an overstatement.

Overall, the Punjab elections and the unusual context in which they were held have made three clear points. First, although the Congress-I

was remarkably successful in terms of assembly and parliamentary seats, this success is essentially fragile and is based on a very narrow support base. The aggregate number of state assembly votes for the party was only 10% of the total electorate, and this support was heavily drawn from urban areas with only nominal representation of the Sikh peasantry. Congress-I's claims to be a broad communal and class coalition have been further eroded by the rise of the BSP, which made substantial gains in its traditional support among the Scheduled and other backward castes and its appeal to the urban Hindu constituency of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). To what extent the Congress-I vote was also a victim of the boycott remains a moot point. Assuming that one-third to one-half of Congress-I voters did not cast their votes, the election still confirms the Congress-I performance as weaker than in 1985.

Second, the virtual nonrepresentation of the majority religious (Sikh) and social (peasantry) community has cast a shadow over the viability of the election results. Clearly, the Congress-I has "won the battle for the state legislature but it has lost the war for Sikh hearts."⁹ Even allowing for the factor of intimidation, which certainly deterred many voters, it is likely that the impressive boycott was also an expression of disapproval of President's Rule and the Indian government's policies. Taking into account the boycott, the level of mobilization in the June poll, and the results of the 1989 Lok Sabha elections, it is more than reasonable to suggest that the Sikh political parties, united or factionalized, would have defeated the Congress-I. Their decision not to participate, therefore, was a landmark development indicative not only of denial of self-interest but a recognition that simple elections will not restart the political process in Punjab.

Third, the conduct of the elections and the circumstances in which they were undertaken undermined one of the strategic cards the central government had in disentangling the "Punjab Problem." After 1984, the idea of state assembly elections was largely geared to the belief that elections should legitimize and restore the democratic process *after* a comprehensive agreement on Sikh demands according to the Rajiv-Longowal Accord. For pragmatic interests, the Chandra Shekhar ministry subverted this logic, and the February election merely continued the process. By holding elections, the central government has both demonstrated its commitment to constitutional propriety and has shown that such a commitment, when it intersects with party interests, is worth maintaining even at the cost of a serious erosion of democratic legitimacy. Ironically, such a commitment was quickly jettisoned in the decision to postpone the election set for June 1991.

9. *India Today* (New Delhi), 15 March 1992.

Prospects for the Future

The formation of the first Congress ministry in Punjab after nine years is unlikely to provide a lasting solution to the "Punjab Problem." The party leaders who boycotted the 1992 election and their supporters intensified their campaign to oust what they call a "puppet administration." Despite the new chief minister's promise to "pacify" Punjab and rule for five years, his immediate concern—like that of the President's Rule regime—was to contain the rising tide of violence. Less than two weeks after the elections, he narrowly escaped an assassination attempt. Armed militants also increased their attacks on military and civilian targets with an alarming increase in the daily death rate. In March the industrial district of Ludhiana came to a virtual standstill and was placed under direct army rule alongside the adjoining Sangrur District. These instances of the potentially explosive situation in the state led to repeated assertions by the Indian and Punjab governments that the army will remain in Punjab as long as it is required. Nor was it likely that the Congress-I ministry could improve its legitimacy rating by championing the outstanding territorial and economic demands vis-à-vis Harayana or appealing to rural populism. For most of the Sikh leadership and the community, the Rajiv-Longowal Accord had become essentially a non-issue; moreover, the Congress-I government in Harayana, led by the intransigent Bhajan Lal, has sustained its opposition to the Accord. Opportunities for rural populism are severely limited by the fiscal crisis in the state, and the development program announced by the new ministry in its budgetary sessions made few concessions to the rural sector.¹⁰

The prospect of what one former governor called "an open rebellion" in Punjab revived speculation in New Delhi of a new "package-deal."¹¹ Such a deal, if it included a resolution of the territorial and economic demands, might provide more ballast to Congress-I state government but would inevitably invite criticism as to why it was not announced prior to the elections when it could have induced the majority of Sikh moderates to participate. Further, the legitimacy value from such a package would be considerably diminished if the Indian government were unwilling to call fresh elections, and it is unlikely to contemplate such a possibility given the political and military investment in the February poll.

Indeed the likelihood of a new election seemed increasingly improbable as the boycott, and the weak performance of the Akali Dal (K), strengthened the position of the Sikh armed militants, democratic militants, and the radicals. Parliamentarism, the essential lubricant that had sustained

10. *Des Pardes*, 10 April 1992.

11. *Ibid.*

the moderates, was dealt a blow by the postponement and subsequent cancellation of the June 1991 poll and the "khaki election" of February 1992. Moderate leaders were compelled to follow the logic of the militants and issued a joint declaration on March 18 from Anandpur calling for a "sovereign Sikh state." Some radical and democratic militants conceded that the armed militants' goal and strategy had proved correct. On April 13, 1992 (*Basakhi* Sikh new year), an open call was made for the creation of a sovereign state of Khalistan. While factional differences among Sikh leaders will always create a potential for central governments to seek a resolution of the "Punjab Problem" by accentuating the disjunction between ethnic demands and the desire of Sikh leaders for political power, the above developments and the violent response to the new Congress state administration suggested that even the most accomplished Sikh leadership would find it difficult to reconcile the goal of Sikh self-determination within the framework of the Indian Union.

However, as the year has progressed, the Congress ministry has been bolstered by the increasing effectiveness of the security forces against the militants—a number of leading militants have been eliminated—and its impressive showing in the municipal elections in September 1992 where it won more than half of the seats. Moreover, although many moderate and radical Sikh leaders have been detained and restricted from mobilizing support, there is a growing realization among them that perhaps the February election boycott was a mistake.¹² This new realism and the unexpected survival of the Congress-I administration provides a potential space for maneuver, but whether it will be utilized remains highly unlikely. The factionalized Sikh political leadership—moderate to militant—while it rues the missed opportunity for political power at the state level, seems locked in the rhetoric of self-determination. At the same time, the "achievements" of the Congress-I government in containing militancy have endeared it to a central government beleaguered by a succession of crises—financial scandal, the Ayodhya temple/mosque conflict, internal dissension within the Congress-I, and others. Against this background, the urgency to find a dramatic solution to the "Punjab Problem" has receded. Hence, while the possibility of an imminent breakdown of political order has clearly been arrested, the opportunity for a major breakthrough has once more been missed.

In retrospect, the 1992 Punjab elections will probably be seen as marking a watershed in the post-1984 "Punjab Problem," when the main Sikh political leadership decided to forgo its faith in parliamentarism and pursue the goal of an independent Sikh state. The road from the Rajiv-

12. Author's interviews, July–August 1992, in Punjab.

Longowal Accord to 1992 has been painful, reluctant, and hesitant. As Indian governments have vacillated or sought to impose their will, the main Sikh leadership has gradually edged, often unwillingly at the prompting of armed militants, from claims to regional autonomy under the Anandpur Sahib Resolution (1985–89) to Sikh self-determination (1990–91). In contrast, Indian Union governments have popularized the view that Punjab is increasingly ungovernable and that the purpose of elections, if they have to be held, is essentially to fulfill a constitutional obligation. The policies of the present Rao Congress-I government were certainly carefully calculated to meet a constitutional commitment after the debacle of June 1991 and to prepare for the contingency of ungovernability.¹³ It remains to be seen whether 1992 will rank with 1986, 1987, 1990, and 1991 as another missed opportunity for a comprehensive settlement of the “Punjab Problem.”

13. *Tribune*, 13 December 1991.